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# Women in the Railroad World

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**W**OMEN in railroad service are no longer the novel sight they were during the war-time emergency. The high water mark of their employment was reached in October, 1918, when their number totaled over one hundred thousand in all classes of work. In the nine months since the armistice there has been an appreciable falling off in numbers, the causes and significance of which must be studied in the light of present tendencies.

## INTRODUCTION OF WOMEN INTO RAILROAD SERVICE

In order to secure a full understanding of women's place in the railroad world it is necessary to discuss the various phases of their introduction. According to the statistics of the United States Railroad Administration, Women's Service Section, the number rose from 61,162, January 1, 1918, to 82,370, July 1, and 101,785, October 1. This was an increase of 66 per cent in a period of nine months. Nor does this fully measure the change. As early as the spring of 1917, women had begun to make their appearance on a number of roads increasingly.

At that time far sighted officials saw that an urgent need of labor would develop as the war progressed and insisted upon women being placed in many new positions. It took many months to overcome the long established prejudice on the part of railroad men against the employment of women. It was only after our entrance into the war, and especially after the first draft, that the process of introducing women began to be speeded up, accelerating every month until after the armistice. The process gained such headway that women finally constituted as much as 50 per cent of the forces in the general offices of many railroads. Officials generally admit that at this critical time, when a literal break-down of the office forces was threatening, the women saved the situation. Many were wives and sisters

of men in military service who turned to railroad work as a means of livelihood, and many no doubt were animated by patriotic purpose to serve their country at a time of need.

### CHARACTER OF WORK DONE

Coming now to the character of work done by the women, statistics show that by far the larger proportion, namely 70 per cent, went into clerical work. This class includes not only stenographers, typists and machine operators, but also clerks of all kinds, ticket sellers and accountants. These employees were located not only in the general office buildings in cities and towns, but were scattered all along the line in the smaller offices of shops, road and yard masters and engine houses.

The publicity given to the new and unusual forms of work done by the railroad women, apparently gave rise to the general impression that the majority were employed in these occupations. It is true that many were taken on in positions never before held by women and that they helped very substantially during the war in performing these duties, but the total number so employed is slight compared with the clerks. In the shops, for instance, at the time of maximum employment, women formed only 5 per cent of the total; in the signal service, including telegraph and telephone operators handling train orders, there was another 5 per cent. In the round houses and in track work there were only 1 per cent.

These occupations are indeed of great interest because they show the capacity of women to enter successfully into new fields. Besides being employed as laborers in the shops, the women were put at various kinds of machine work and trained as electrical welders, air-brake repairers, hammer operators, crane operators, molders, etc. In the round houses they wiped engines, operated transfer tables and did general laborers' work. In outdoor jobs they came to the attention of the public especially as track laborers and crossing tenders.

If the war had continued longer and the labor shortage become more acute, there would no doubt have been a great extension of these forms of work. But apart from the time and attention necessary for training women, there are practical difficulties in making place for them, especially in the shops and yards,

because of the lack of proper physical conditions. It was exceedingly difficult, for example, under war conditions, to construct the new dressing rooms, toilets, etc., that were necessary. The employment of women in these positions did not last long enough to test out the effect on their health and general welfare. It is not yet clear whether they can be retained in such service without injury. Some occupations are without doubt unsuitable, especially for the young girls who eagerly applied for them. The Railroad Administration discontinued the employment of women as section laborers, for instance, and as truckers in depots and warehouses on account of the extraordinary physical exertion required. It was greatly to the credit of the Administration that these excessively taxing forms of work were abandoned early in the fall of 1918 when the fear of a labor shortage was most pressing and that a way should have been found to supply the necessary man power.

#### WAGES

The chief attraction which drew women to the railroad service undoubtedly lay in the wages offered. The orders of the Administration, for instance, established a minimum of \$87.50 monthly for all clerical work, or \$1,050 a year. This was far above the rate of pay then prevailing for similar jobs in other businesses, and was, indeed, an extraordinary opportunity for young girls in small towns who had been working for \$10 or \$12 a week. In cities the difference between railroad wages and outside business was not so great. In fact, in a number of centers the railroads complained that even under the new wage orders, girls left the service for higher salaries, instancing especially comptometer operators who found positions with banks.

In the shops most of the more skilled women were in the ranks of the "helpers," and were paid the specified rate of 45 cents an hour. This, as well as the cleaner's rate of 35 cents to 40 cents, depending on locality, was eagerly sought, as these wages were very welcome to the women who had previously earned a lower compensation as scrubbing women, or whose regular employment in near by mills, hotels, and in domestic service had not rewarded them so well. (In the new national agreement of the shop crafts, which is to be effective October 20, the coach cleaners

are to be given an increase of four cents, bringing the minimum rate of pay up to 45 cents an hour.) It thus happened that the railroads substantially raised the standard of living for the women who entered the service. It offered them opportunities of congenial work as well as a raise in pay.

#### INDUSTRIAL EQUALITY OF WOMEN EMPLOYEES

It was, indeed, a new experience for the women to enjoy the same economic advantages as men. The very first order of the Director General established a policy of equal pay for men and women when they do the same class of work. This was a significant step in the industrial history of women in this country, because it was the first announcement by the government, in any department, that it considered women on an equality with men in all the different forms of work which they were called on to perform.

Moreover, in most of the railroad occupations, women are admitted into the labor organizations on the same terms as men. The Brotherhood of Railway Clerks has undoubtedly taken in the largest number, allowing them to become members of local lodges on the same footing as men, and appointing them also as members of committees. The coach cleaners have been organized in separate women's locals by the carmen. More recently they are entering the new cleaners' unions open to both men and women, colored and white, of the American Federation of Labor. The order of Railroad Telegraphers also admits women into their membership without requiring them to enter separate locals.

#### DECREASE IN NUMBER EMPLOYED

Because of the changed conditions of the labor market, an appreciable decrease in the number of women employed was to be expected during the winter of 1918-19. This change actually occurred. By January 1, 1919, the number of women fell to 99,709, a decrease of 2 per cent as compared with the high water mark of October 1, 1918. The reduction on April 1, brought the figures down to 86,519, or 14.9 per cent decrease. The latest returns compiled for July 1, show the total number now employed to be 82,294. This is a smaller decrease, namely, 4.9 per cent for the last quarter.

## REASONS FOR DECREASE

To account for these reductions various important reasons must be analyzed. Are they to be interpreted as a movement to crowd women out of the service, or are other factors to be considered? It is to be noted, in the first place, that early in the year men began to return from military service and were reinstated by the railroads according to federal orders. This meant that the latest employes had to be laid off to make room for the soldiers and sailors. In this change naturally more women than men were affected, as their seniority rights were less.

In the second place the decreases were due to a drastic reduction in the labor force on all the railroads of the country during the early part of the year 1919. This cut was made by the government in order to effect urgent economies. Women, again, were more affected than men on account of their lower seniority rights.

From the point of view of occupation, the greatest reduction since October has taken place in the round houses and shops, where the number of women fell from approximately 7,000 to 2,500. To explain this shrinkage, it must be remembered that women were largely used as laborers in these places and were often found unsatisfactory, because too much heavy labor was required of them. Under these circumstances it was inevitable that they should be dropped when man labor again became available. The decrease is also to some extent explained by the action of the Railroad Administration in discontinuing the employment of women in trucking, in track work, and as parcel room attendants, because of the risk of overstrain and injury. On the other hand, in the occupations in which women have long been employed, such as coach and car cleaning and laundry work, there is naturally a much smaller percentage of decrease.

Aside from these reasons for the decrease in the number of women employed, namely,—the return of the men from military service, the reduction of the labor force, and the unsuitability of the work,—another factor remains to be considered. The final test of the position of women is their value to the service. Can they do the work as well as the men whom they replaced, and thus prove their right to be retained? Now that men are again available, it is clear that women must prove their efficiency if they are to be kept in competition with men employes. The

test is a real one, for in retaining women, the officials are not availing themselves, as other employers do, of a cheap source of labor, because the same salary is paid to men and women.

#### WOMEN MAKE GOOD IN MANY POSITIONS

The chief objection which has been urged against the employment of women is their unfamiliarity with railroad life. A boy who grows up in the service acquires a general knowledge as he advances from job to job. There is no doubt that women were handicapped when they first began work on account of this lack of experience, especially in outside work, and because of their lack of familiarity with the materials used. Under the pressure of war conditions, it was difficult to give them adequate training, but some experiments in personal instruction were highly successful. Women have, for instance, only rarely qualified as clerks at a freight claim desk, as this requires a full understanding of claims. One of the railroads furnishes an example of systematic instruction for this work. A group of women were given lectures for one month on the various types of claims, details of rule book, etc. They were then taken to freighthouses to see how freight is handled; they learned the trade name of commodities; they visited yards to examine loaded freight cars on the tracks; they observed the construction of empty freight cars and went to car repair shops to examine damaged ones; they visited local stations to observe the agent's work in handling freight, and then traveled by way-freight to see the methods of handling this class of goods. Finally the group was taken to the shipping department of several large factories to see how articles are packed. In fact, as the agent said, they saw and learned a great deal more about the movement of freight than most men in the office knew, and they were thus able to begin the work of investigating claims with a background of actual knowledge. There is no doubt that intelligent training of this kind can make up for the lack of railroad experience. It enabled these women to qualify for highly paid positions, which had previously been considered too difficult for them.

This is only one instance of well planned training. Courses were also carried on in various cities for the instruction of ticket sellers. One of the chief objections which had been made to the

employment of women in these positions had been their ignorance of geography. Through their training they were able to overcome this and other handicaps. A considerable number have made good even in inter-line work, which is known to be the most difficult part of the field.

There is undoubtedly a consensus of opinion on the part of railroad officials that women have made good in a great variety of positions, although judgment is not unanimous as to the jobs for which they are best fitted. The women clerks, officials say, adapt themselves quickly to routine work, pay close attention to details, and are careful and accurate. In manual occupations, such as sorting tickets and way bills and for comptometer work, they show greater dexterity and speed than boys. Their accuracy in certain cases is interestingly proved by the records of errors. In one office, for instance, where women as well as men are employed for the abstracting of inter-line way-bills, the total errors amounted to less than one half of one per cent, although they were working at a high rate of speed. Several machine operators in the same office, who were cutting cards, showed their deftness by an almost perfect record in three successive months, although they were cutting thousands of cards each day. One woman is listed as having cut 85,000 cards during one month without an error.

The criticism has also been made that while women are good in routine, they lack ambition to advance into higher positions. This statement will hardly hold water in view of the many important places now filled by women. That they have, in some instances, been slow to avail themselves of opportunities to bid for better positions is presumably due to their lack of industrial experience. Wherever they have been educated up to their new jobs and been encouraged to advance, they have shown the same capacity as men.

Judging from the facts before us at present, all indications point to the retention of women as a permanent part of the personnel in practically all types of clerical work. Space does not suffice to discuss the probable fate of women in all classes of railroad occupations, in which they are found at present. It can be said, however, that they have proved their value as telegraph and telephone operators in the transmission of train orders, and



will be retained in these positions. They are also spoken of highly as station agents. Women will, of course, continue to do all the different forms of cleaning, including coach and station cleaning, and they will be found in the laundries and personal service, where they have the field practically to themselves.

In conclusion it may be said that sufficient time has not yet elapsed to allow a comprehensive statement of the future of women on the railroads to be made. This article is intended only as a contribution in the railroad field to the general stock taking and valuation of women's industrial achievements, to which the war has given rise.